

Appendix 8-G

Hiring a Qualified Wetlands Specialist

When Is A Qualified Wetlands Specialist Needed?

Qualified wetlands specialists are usually hired as consultants to identify and delineate wetlands, assess the functions and values of a particular wetland, provide assistance with wetland regulations and permits, often including completion of necessary application forms, and provide advice about designing wetland compensatory mitigation projects. They are generally hired by landowners or developers who want to do something on their property that may affect a wetland. Many local governments hire consultants to provide third-party review services. Some consultants are self-employed; others work for larger environmental consulting firms. The recommendations included here are intended to assist in locating consultants who can help with wetland issues.

What Is A Qualified Wetlands Specialist?

There is no government-sanctioned program for certifying someone as a “qualified wetlands specialist.” Generally, the term means a person with professional experience and comprehensive training in wetlands issues, including experience performing wetland delineations, assessing wetland functions and values, analyzing wetland impacts, and recommending and designing wetland mitigation projects.

The Society of Wetland Scientists (SWS) administers a professional certification program for wetland scientists that has two levels of certification: Professional Wetland Scientist (PWS) and Wetland Professional In-Training (WPIT). A person certified as a PWS would be considered a qualified wetlands specialist. This program is discussed further in the shaded box at the end of this appendix.

If the person is not a certified PWS, there is no simple means of determining qualifications. However, the following criteria are indicators of someone who may be qualified to perform the wide range of tasks typically required of a wetlands specialist:

- At a minimum, a Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Arts or equivalent degree in hydrology, soil science, botany, ecology, or related field. A graduate degree in one of these fields is an indication of more advanced expertise.
- At least two years of full-time work experience as a wetlands professional including delineating wetlands using the state or federal manuals, preparing wetland reports, conducting function assessments, and developing and

implementing mitigation plans. Generally, the more years of experience the greater the expertise.

- Completion of additional wetland-specific training programs. This could include a more comprehensive program such as the University of Washington Wetland Science and Management Certificate Program, or individual workshops on wetland delineation, function assessment, mitigation design, hydrophytic plant or hydric soil identification, etc.

Keep in mind that most people engaged in professional wetlands work have greater expertise in some aspects of the field than others. A person may have in-depth training in plant ecology or soils or hydrology but few people have all three. A person may have extensive experience in wetland delineation or function assessment and have little experience in designing and implementing mitigation projects. Thus, it is important to be clear on what specific tasks need to be completed and make sure the person or firm being hired has the specific expertise needed. Generally, more complex projects require multiple individuals with the collective expertise to address all aspects of the project.

How To Find A Wetlands Consultant

There are a number of ways to find the names of wetlands consultants. Finding a qualified consultant can be difficult since “wetland consultants” are not required to be certified, licensed, or bonded. One approach is to look in the Yellow Pages of the phone directory (or the directories of the closest cities) under “Environmental and Ecological Services.” You can also contact the local government planning office and ask if they know of any local wetlands consultants. Some local governments maintain lists of wetland professionals they consider to be well qualified. Consultants may also be found by requesting the advice of associations or businesses that commonly encounter wetlands in their work, such as the Building Industry Association and Association of Washington Business. Finally, state and federal resource agencies can be asked for referrals. Be aware, however, that most agencies will not be able to provide recommendations because of questions of fairness.

Selecting A Wetlands Consultant

A number of factors should be considered before hiring a wetlands consultant. When interviewing consultants, their qualifications should be carefully considered (see above for the minimum recommended). Be sure to ask the following questions before making a selection:

- Does the consultant have training or experience in the use of the 1987 federal or 1997 Washington State wetlands delineation manual? The selected consultant should have the ability to apply wetland identification methods used by state and federal agencies. Make sure that the consultant can identify wetlands and their boundaries consistent with regulating agencies.

- Has the consultant had additional training or expertise in related fields such as hydrology, soil science, botany, or ecology?
- Is the consultant familiar with local, state, and federal wetland regulations?
- How long has the consultant been doing wetlands work? How much experience do they have delineating wetlands in the field, assessing wetlands functions and values, or working with wetland regulations? Has the consultant worked in the part of the state where you propose to develop? Ask the consultant for examples of previous work similar to the services being requested. Can the consultant take you to a successful wetland mitigation project they designed and/or implemented?
- Does the consultant have experience working with regulatory agencies? Ask the consultant to describe their working relationship with the agencies that will be reviewing and/or permitting your project.
- Does the consultant have experience working on a team? Given the complexity of some projects, it is expected that a wetland consultant will team with others who have experience in related fields such as water quality, wildlife, stormwater management, and hydrogeology. Ask the consultant for a list of people they have teamed with in the past.
- Who were some of the consultant's past clients? Were they satisfied customers? Call them and find out who they worked with from the consulting firm and how they liked working with them. Ask whether there were any problems that occurred during or after the project, how the consultant handled those problems, and what they charged for their work. Find out what type of track record the company has with local, state, and federal agencies.
- Request references that include clients who have had projects reviewed and approved by the regulatory agencies (Corps, Ecology, and local government).
- Ask colleagues and other businesses, such as real estate, development, homebuilding, etc. that are routinely involved in wetland concerns. Ask them about their experiences and knowledge regarding the consultant being considered.
- Who will be working on your project? Will it be the principal consultant with the years of experience, or someone with less experience who works for them?
- How much will the consultant charge? Compare rates but do not let cost be the sole criterion. Be sure to consider training, experience, and the other factors as well. A good consultant who charges more may end up saving money by reducing permit-processing delays.

Society of Wetland Scientists Professional Certification Program

Another option is to check whether the consultant under consideration is a Certified Professional Wetland Scientist. The website <http://www.wetlandcert.org/> allows you to search by name, city, and/or state.

As explained in the Professional Wetland Scientist program overview:

Certification is not required by any agency and has no official or legal standing. However, certification signifies that the academic and work experience of a Professional Wetland Scientist (PWS) meets the standards expected by his or her peers of a practicing wetland professional and provides acknowledgment to his or her peers of adherence to standards of professional ethics with regard to the conduct and practice of wetland science.

Wetland Professional in Training (WPIT) is considered a preliminary step for persons who meet the requirements for either (but not both) education and experience. Professional Wetland Scientist (PWS) certification is awarded for those meeting both educational and experience requirements.

Minimum degree requirements for WPIT and PWS are the BA or BS degrees, with course distribution of 15 semester hours each in biological and physical sciences and 6 hours in quantitative areas. For certification as a PWS, an additional 15 semester hours in wetland-related courses are required. In addition to comprehensive training in wetland science, a PWS is expected to have professional experience of at least 5 years as a wetland scientist, demonstrating the application of current technical knowledge dealing with wetland resources and activities.

References

Washington State Department of Ecology, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. 2004. *Guidance on Wetland Mitigation in Washington State: Part 1 - Laws, Rules, Policies, and Guidance Related to Wetland Mitigation* (Ecology Publication 04-06-013a, April 2004).